

Tim and the Hidden People

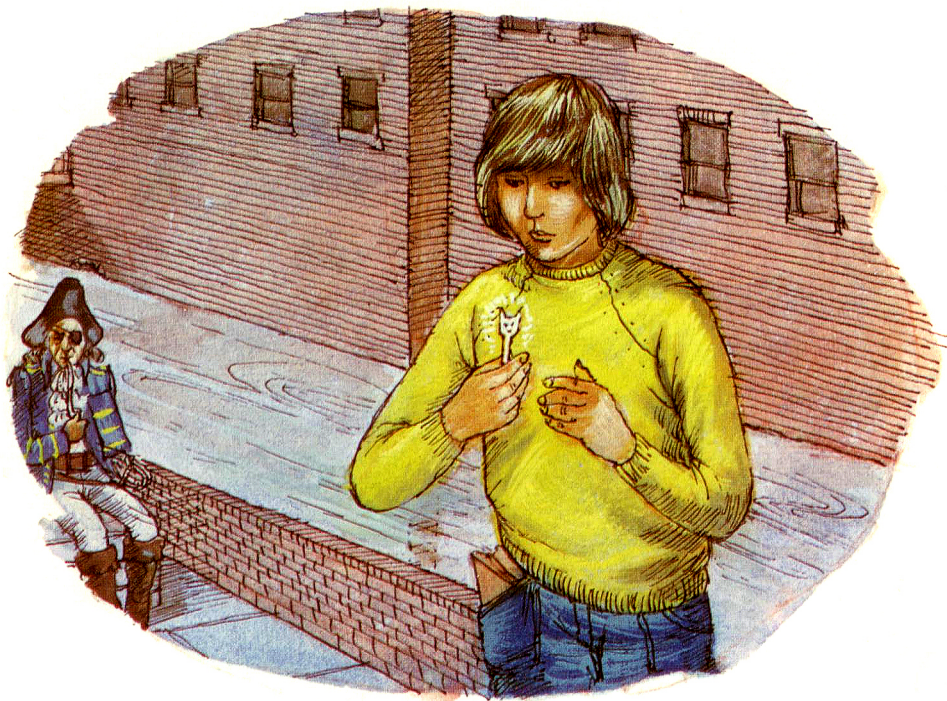
The Return of The Key

Sheila K. McCullagh

Illustrated by Pat Cook



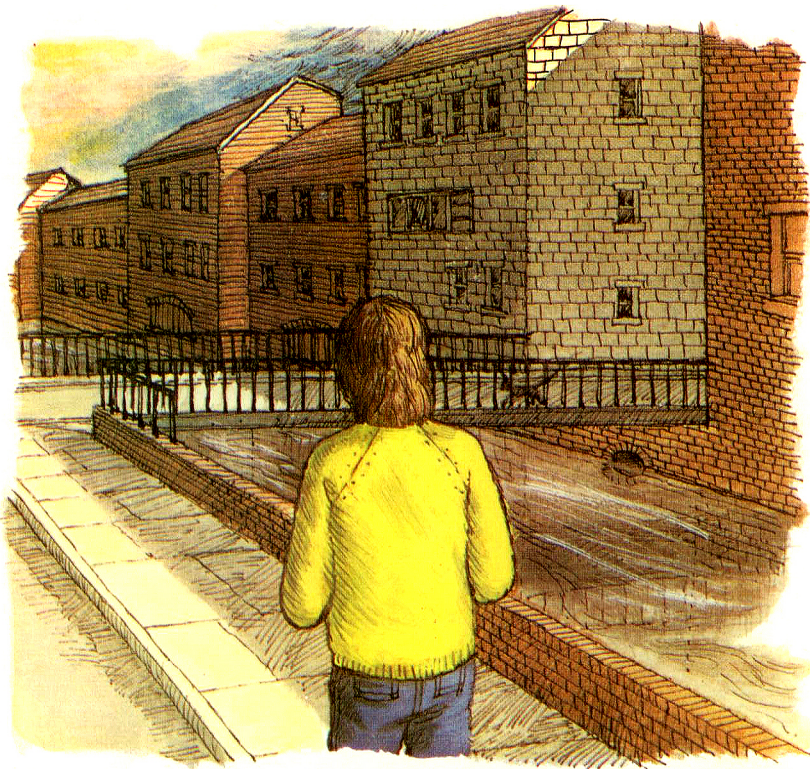
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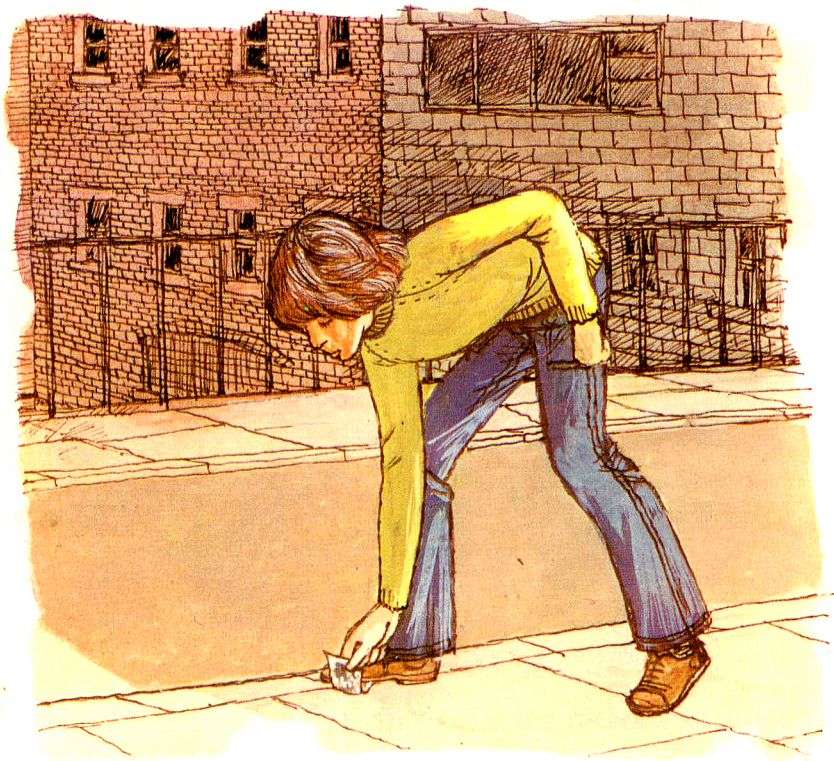
Tim kicked a stone slowly across The Yard. It was a summer evening. School was over. Tim's friend Arun was away, and Tim had nothing to do.

He kicked the stone over to the gap that led to the road.

Tim went out of the gap, and wandered along the canal towards the bridge.

He stopped suddenly.

Was that a black cat on the bridge?



Tim ran along to the bridge, but no one was there. If there had been a cat, it was gone now.

A sudden gust of wind blew.

A bit of paper came fluttering over the bridge in the wind.

Tim put his foot on it as it blew by. He bent down, and picked it up.

It was a pound note.

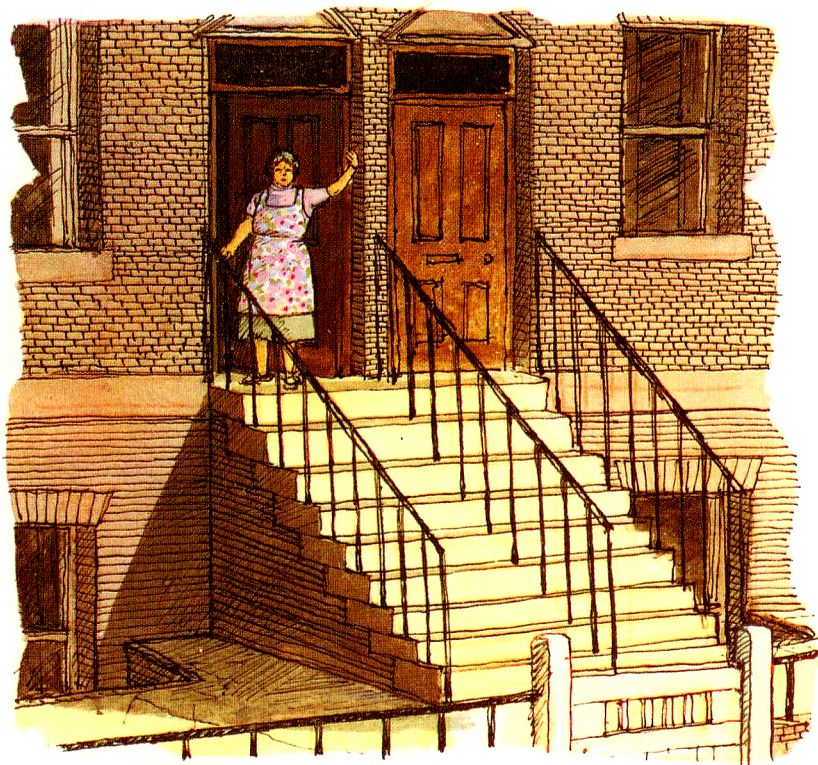


Tim looked all around. There was no one in sight. He went across the bridge and looked down the street. There was no one there.

“I can’t give it back, if there’s no one to give it to,” he said to himself.

He looked at the note. Aunt May never had any money to spare, and a pound was a lot of money to Tim. There were so many things he wanted.

He put the pound note in his pocket, and walked slowly back to The Yard.



Aunt May was standing in the doorway, looking out. As soon as she saw him, she called, "Tim! Tim, come here!"

Tim could tell she was upset. He ran over to the house, and up the steps.

Aunt May stepped back into the hall. Tim saw Miss Miff standing there behind her.

"Tim—" began Aunt May. But Miss Miff didn't let her finish.

“You wicked boy!” cried Miss Miff, shaking her fist at Tim. “You wicked boy! Give me back my purse!”

“I haven’t got your purse,” said Tim.

“Don’t tell me such lies,” cried Miss Miff. “You give it back to me this minute, or I’ll call the policeman, and have you locked up!”

“Now then, Miss Miff,” said Aunt May, “I’ve never known Tim take anything before. I expect you dropped your purse somewhere.”

“No, I didn’t!” said Miss Miff. “You’ll say *I’m* telling lies, next! I left it in my room. Turn out your pockets, you wicked boy, and then we’ll see!”

Tim went white. He stood quite still, staring at Miss Miff.

“You’d better turn your pockets out, Tim,” said Aunt May. “Then Miss Miff will see that you haven’t got any money.”

Tim looked at Aunt May. “I—I have got some,” he said. “But I found it, Aunt May. I did find it. I found a pound note just now, up there by the bridge.”

He pulled the pound note out of his pocket, and handed it to Aunt May.



“There! I told you so!” cried Miss Miff, snatching the note from Aunt May. “Where have you put the rest of it, you wicked boy? There were ten pounds in my purse, and a lot of silver, too.”

“I didn’t take it,” said Tim. “I found that note. I haven’t got your money. Look!”

He turned out all his pockets. Except for an old knife and a bit of string, they were empty.

“He’s hidden it in his room!” cried Miss Miff. She started up the stairs.

Aunt May looked at Tim. “We’ll have to look, Tim,” she said. “Are you sure you don’t know?”

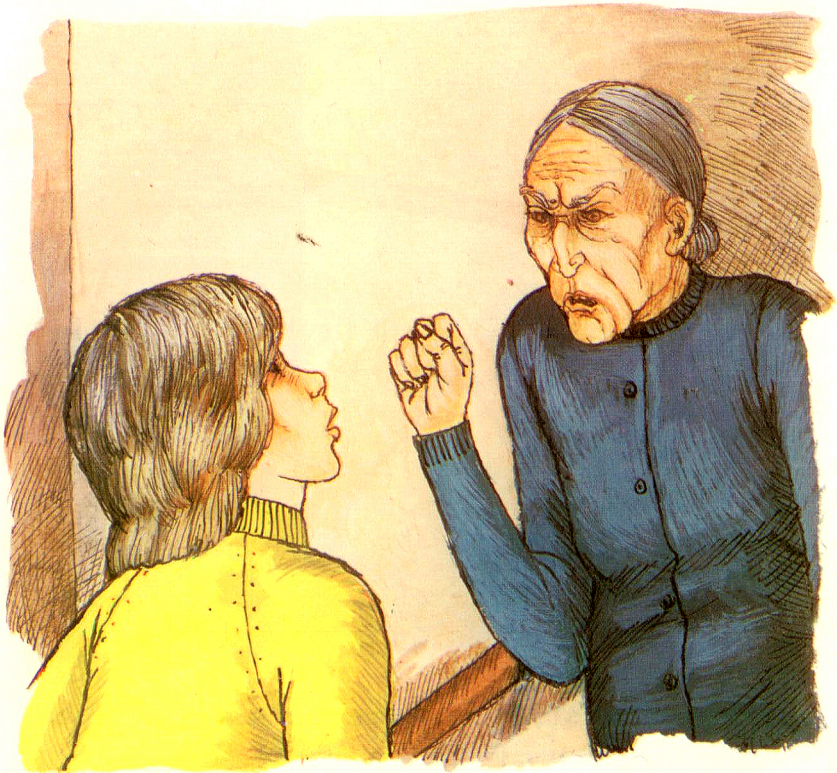
“I *don’t* know,” said Tim. “I didn’t take it.”

Aunt May went off up the stairs after Miss Miff without another word.

Tim sat down miserably on the bottom step, and waited. There were thumps and bangs from upstairs, as Miss Miff pulled out the drawers and looked in all the corners in his room.



Tim sat there, feeling that he hated her. Just because she rented the best room, she behaved as if the house belonged to her. Aunt May couldn't help it. Miss Miff paid her rent every Saturday. They never had to wait for it, and they needed the money. Aunt May always said that they must put up with Miss Miff, but just then Tim hated her. He almost wished he had let her float away, that time when Tobias made the magic cakes, and Miss Miff almost floated out of the window.



Miss Miff and Aunt May came down the stairs.
Tim got up.

“Where is it? Where have you hidden it?”
cried Miss Miff, shaking her fist under his nose.

Tim stepped back and shook his head.

“I didn’t,” he said. “I didn’t take it.”

“You’d better go up to your room, Tim,”
said Aunt May.



But Tim suddenly felt that he couldn't bear to be in the house a minute longer. He turned, and ran out of the front door, down the steps and across The Yard, and out into the street.

"Come back!" cried Miss Miff. "Come back, you wicked boy!"

But Tim ran on.

When he came to the canal, he slowed down to a walk. He pushed his hands into his pockets, and walked along with his head down, kicking a stone.

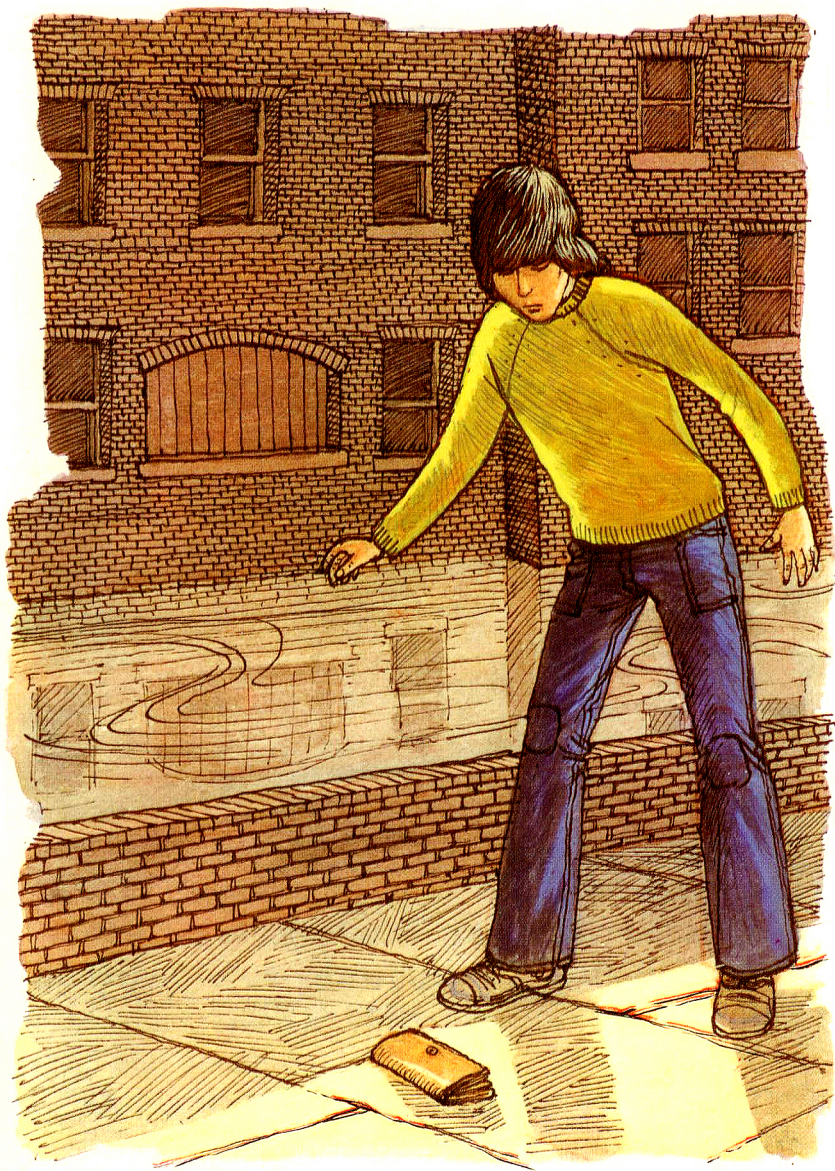
He hadn't gone far, when he suddenly stopped.

Miss Miff's purse was lying on the ground in front of him. He knew the purse. It was a big one, with a flap for notes and a pocket for silver. There it was, lying in front of him on the pavement.

Tim stood still, staring at the purse.

If he picked it up and took it back now, no one, not even Aunt May, would believe he hadn't stolen it in the first place.

He looked around. There was no one in sight, but if he left it there, someone would find it. A few minutes ago, he had felt that he hated Miss Miff, but he knew that she wasn't rich. She needed the money. He didn't want to leave the purse for someone else to take. Tim bent down slowly, and picked it up.

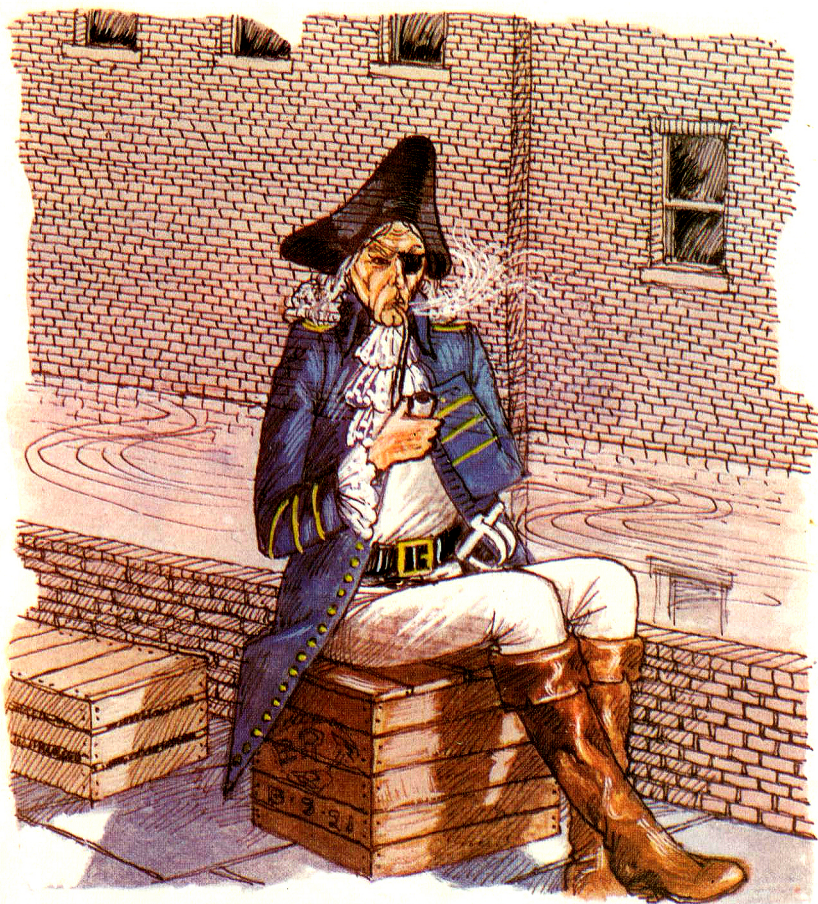




And then he nearly dropped it again.

A key was lying on the pavement. It had been hidden by the purse. It was a strange, old key, and it shone like silver. It was the key Tim had tossed into the canal months ago, when he wanted to get rid of the Hidden People. The key had come back!

Tim pushed the purse into his pocket, picked up the key, and stood up.



He looked along the canal bank.

Captain Jory was sitting on an empty wooden box, twenty feet away. He was puffing at a long pipe, and looking at Tim.

Tim slipped the key into his pocket, and went slowly over to Captain Jory.



“Well, Tim, it’s been a long time,” said Captain Jory.

Tim nodded.

“You look glad to see me,” said Captain Jory. “Even if you did toss the key into the canal. A fine job we had getting it back, too.”

“I *am* glad to see you,” said Tim. “I only tossed the key away because of Arun. Arun’s a friend of mine, and Tobias said the Hidden People would drive him away.”

Captain Jory nodded. “That’s why I’ve come to see you now, Tim,” he said. “But don’t toss the key away another time. Give it back to me, if you don’t want it. I don’t want to have to spend another week fishing for it!”

Captain Jory looked so cheerful about it, that Tim laughed. “All right,” he said.

Captain Jory took a pull at his pipe. “It’s because of Arun that I’ve come along to see you, Tim,” he said. “It’s like this: the Highwayman and his people have taken over Hollow Hill, and my friends and I have nowhere to go. We were going to take over the empty house in The Yard, till Arun moved in, and you tossed the key away. We’ve looked for another house, but we can’t find one that will do. Arun and his family won’t stay, if we move in. That’s what everyone wants to do. But I said that I’d come and see you first.”



“But what can *I* do?” asked Tim.

“Help us to get the Highwayman out of Hollow Hill, Tim,” said Captain Jory, putting his hand on his knee, and leaning forward. “That’s our home. Help us to get back there, and we’ll not want to hang around here.”

“But how can I do that?” asked Tim.

“You go and see Melinda,” said Captain Jory. “She won’t help *us*, but she’ll help you. Tobias said she liked you.”

“Who’s Melinda?” asked Tim.

“You know—she lives in the cottage by the wood,” said Captain Jory. “She’s got a tiger-skin rug.”

Tim remembered. “Tobias said she was a safe witch,” he said.

Captain Jory nodded. “So she is,” he said, “if you happen to be a friend of hers. She’s the only one who can get the Highwayman out of Hollow Hill. She won’t do it for *us*, but she’ll do it for *you*. That’s what Tobias says. I haven’t seen her myself. She won’t open her door to me, and if Melinda *doesn’t* want to see you, it’s wiser to keep away.”

Captain Jory blew out another cloud of smoke.

“All right,” said Tim. “I’ll try.”



“Good!” said Captain Jory. “Go and see Melinda as soon as you can.” He got up, and put his hand on Tim’s arm.

“Now, there’s another little thing, Tim,” he said. “You help me, and I’ll help you. You give me that purse you found. I’ll see it gets back where it belongs.”

Tim looked at him.

“I’ll see that woman gets it back,” said Captain Jory, nodding.

Tim pulled out Miss Miff’s purse, and handed it over.

“Good,” nodded Captain Jory, putting the purse in his pocket. “Off you go now, Tim. And mind you don’t toss that key away, or give it to anyone but me. Don’t give it to *anyone*. Understand?”

“All right,” said Tim.

“Promise?” asked Captain Jory.

“Promise,” said Tim.





He walked slowly back to The Yard. His hands were in his pockets, and his left hand gripped the key.

Aunt May came running upstairs from the kitchen as he opened the front door.

"I'm so glad you're back, Tim," she said. "Miss Miff has just found her purse. It fell on her head as she opened her wardrobe door. She must have put it on the top shelf in the wardrobe."



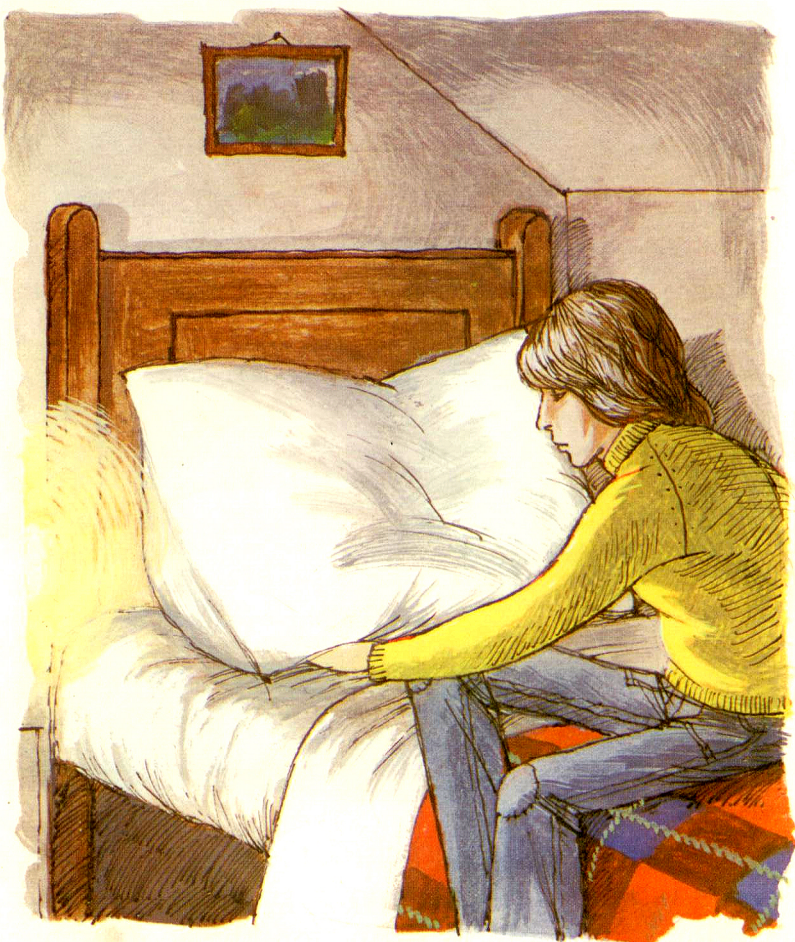
Aunt May held out the pound note. "The ten pounds was still in the purse, so she gave this one back to me. Where did you find it, Tim?"

"By the bridge," said Tim, taking it. "Can I keep it?"

"I suppose so," said Aunt May. "Was there anyone in the street when you found it?"

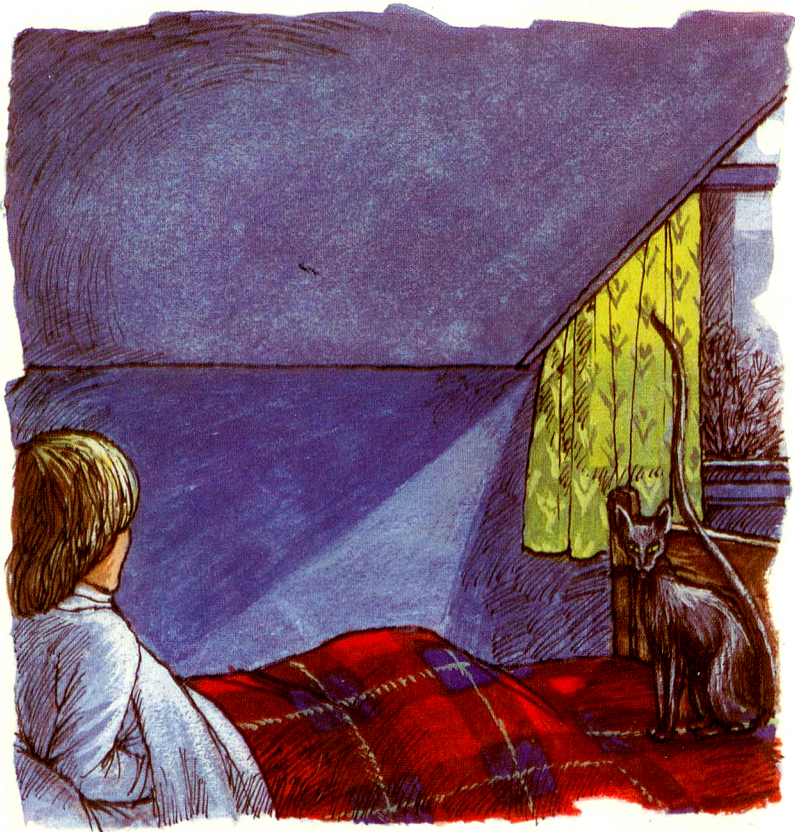
Tim shook his head. "No," he said. "I did look."

"I'm sure you did, Tim," said Aunt May. "You keep it. I'm sorry about Miss Miff. I think she's sorry, too, but she won't say so. Come and have your tea."



When Tim went up to bed, he half-expected to find one of the Hidden People in his room. But there was no one there.

He put the key under his pillow, and climbed into bed.



He wasn't a bit surprised to wake up a few hours later to find the moon shining in at the window, and Tobias sitting on the foot of his bed, looking at him.

"Hallo, Tim," said Tobias. "The broomstick is at the window. Come on!"

"Where are we going?" asked Tim, as he scrambled out of bed.



“Over the house-tops and under the stars,” said Tobias. “Anywhere and nowhere. We’re going for a ride. Don’t you want to feel the night wind on your face, after all this time?”

Tim laughed. He pulled on his clothes, and ran to the window. There was the broomstick, waiting for him outside, with Tobias sitting on one end.



Tim climbed out, and swung himself on to the broomstick. Tobias twitched his tail, and away they went.



Tim had never had such a ride. Tobias seemed to be out to show him just how much fun he could have on a broomstick.

They swept up high into the sky, and he saw the lights of the town far below.

Then they shot down to the streets of the town, as if they were on a roller-coaster.



The streets were empty, except for a big man who was leaning against a wall, singing.

The broomstick swept past under his nose. He couldn't see Tim and Tobias, but he saw the broomstick. He let out a yell, and sat down suddenly on the pavement.



Tim laughed.

Up they went again, over the roofs. Tim could see that Tobias was enjoying it, too.

On and on and on they went, until at last Tim saw the moon shining down on Hollow Hill, far away across the fields.

Tobias swung the broomstick round so suddenly that Tim nearly fell off.

When he could look down again, Tim saw that they were heading for home.

“How was that, Tim?” asked Tobias, as they came into The Yard, and back to Tim’s open window.

Tim laughed. “It was a good ride, Tobias,” he said, as he climbed in.

He looked out at Tobias, standing on the broomstick. “Why didn’t you fly over Hollow Hill?” he asked.

Tobias’ eyes changed. He stood very still on the end of the broomstick.

“Goodnight,” he said suddenly.





His tail twitched.

The broomstick swung round, and was off across The Yard.

Tim stood watching, as it rose up over the roofs of the houses. He saw Tobias' tail waving under a sky full of stars.

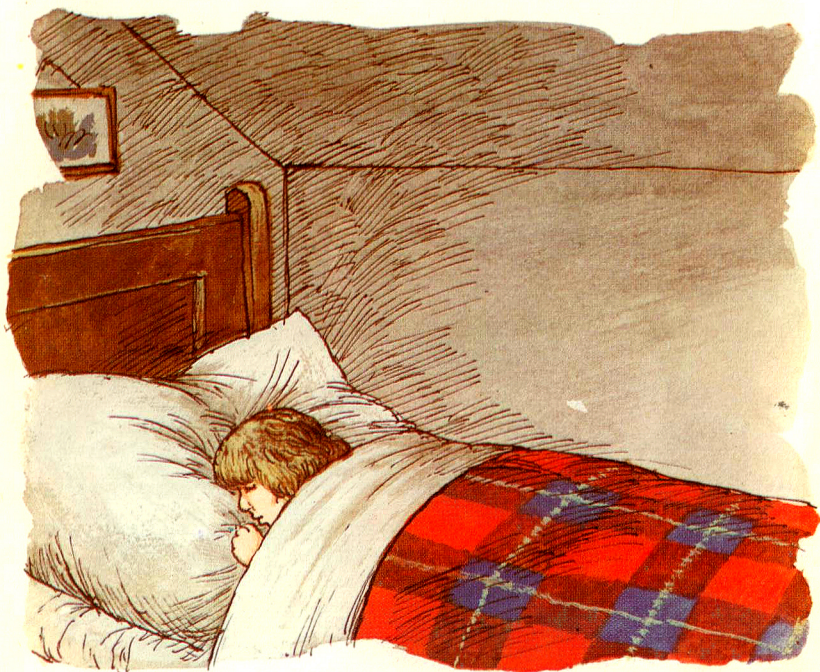
Then the broomstick was gone.

Tim shut the window, pulled off his clothes, and climbed into bed.

He lay there, thinking. He was glad he had the key again. He was glad to have seen Captain Jory. The ride with Tobias had been the best he'd ever had. He felt a bit afraid, when he thought of Hollow Hill, and the safe witch.

But then he thought of the purse falling on Miss Miff's head, and he laughed out loud.

Tim was still smiling as he slipped right down under the bed clothes and went to sleep.



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